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1 Corinthians 10:14–11:1

17th Message

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THE DANGERS OF FREEDOM

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

I was reminded last week of a song, sung by the Kingston Trio, that was popular when I was growing up during the 1960's. It went like this:

They're rioting in Africa
 They're starving in Spain.
 There's hurricanes in Florida,
 and Texas needs rain.
 The whole world is festering,
 with unhappy souls.
 The French hate the Germans,
 and the Germans hate the Poles.
 The Italians hate the Yugoslavs,
 The South Africans hate the Dutch,
 And I don't like anybody very much.
 But we can be grateful,
 and thankful and proud,
 For man is endowed with a mushroom-shaped cloud.
 And we can be certain,
 that some happy day,
 Someone will set the spark off,
 And we will all be blown away.
 They're rioting in Africa
 There's strife in Iran,
 What nature doesn't do to us,
 Will be done by our fellow man.

As I remembered that song, I thought about the powerful truth it communicated so clearly in its day. I think we would all agree that the world is in a mess. Times like these make people realize how needy we really are. But we must face an equally important truth, and that is that God is calling out a people for his name's sake to impact this hurting world. Christians are to have an impact upon our world. The problem we face is not a national problem, but a human one. It is the problem of sin. But Christians know that true peace can only be found at the foot of the cross.

Rather than the church having a positive impact on the world, however, the world frequently has a negative impact on the church. This was how the church in Corinth in the first century was operating — in conditions, I might add, very much like our own in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Corinthians, like many people in this area, were intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally decadent. These proud and sometimes wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was in the area of lifestyle, not theology, that they were confused. Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one's culture must be abandoned when one became a Christian? Paul's answers are decisive, direct, and relevant.

First Corinthians can be divided into two parts. In the first six chapters, Paul deals with four problems in the church that were reported to him. Then beginning in chapter 7, he answers questions

the Corinthian church asked him in a previous letter, one of which had to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols.

William Barclay helps us understand the issue the Corinthians faced:

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. It might be of two kinds, private or public. In private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts. A token part was burned on the altar... the priests received their rightful portion...; the worshiper himself received the rest of the meat. With the meat he gave a banquet. Sometimes these feasts were in the house of the hosts; sometimes they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice was made... The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast at all? Could he possibly take upon his lips meat that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god? If he could not, then he was going to cut himself off from almost all social occasions..."

The gentiles at Corinth who had become believers had attended such meals all their lives. These were held in what was the basic restaurant of antiquity. Every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion. Following their conversion, and after Paul's departure from Corinth, some of them returned to the practice of attending these cultic meals. They were insisting on their right to attend the cultic meals at the temple, to eat whatever food they wanted wherever they wanted. Paul takes three chapters to respond to this issue.

The Corinthians were quite knowledgeable about their freedom in Christ. They were demanding their rights, and they had made their demand known to the apostle. They knew better, they claimed. There was nothing to an idol. How can you worship something that doesn't really exist? they asked. Their attendance at these temples was irrelevant since they were merely eating with their friends, not worshipping what didn't even exist. They knew about food also. Food was irrelevant to God, they said, and if that was so, where they ate it must be irrelevant as well. Finally, in their arrogance they were beginning to doubt Paul's knowledge and authority. There was a question in many of their minds whether Paul had the proper apostolic authority to forbid them on this matter.

The apostle had already told them (in chapter 8) that though he agreed with their theology (that they were free in Christ), their knowledge had made them arrogant and selfish. But, said Paul, the evidence of maturity was not knowledge, but love. There may have been some believers with weak consciences, those who formerly were involved in idol worship, who felt that to eat meat sacrificed to idols would implicate them again in idol worship. Thus Paul exhorts the Corinthians that they should not encourage a weaker brother to violate his conscience by urging him to grow up and eat meat sacrificed to idols. Such knowledge and such an attitude would only damage others. Knowledge is a means to an end—the building up of others. In chapter 9, Paul illustrated that truth from his own experience. Though he was an apostle, and had tremendous rights of authority and power, he yielded those rights in order to be a help to others.

Chapter 10 is a warning about the inherent dangers of freedom. In the first half of the chapter, Paul deals with the primary source of why we cling to our rights, why we are unable to say no to things we ought to refuse. He points out that the danger is discontentedness, a feeling that we must have what we think we need order to be fulfilled.

Paul begins this passage with the word “therefore.” He is summing up what he had already said, in other words. Given all the arguments that he had made in chapters 8, 9, and 10, these are the conclusions that can be drawn. The passage is a wonderful summary of how we are to have a proper influence in the world—how to be in the world, but not of it.

The apostle’s argument revolves around two commands, found in verses 14 and 24: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (v. 14); and, “Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.” (v. 24). These two commands set out the two dangers inherent in our freedom in Christ: the danger of compromise, and the danger of legalism. Wise is the Christian, the man or woman, boy or girl who avoids both of these extremes.

I. The danger of compromise—Flee idolatry

Verses 14–22:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything. No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we? (1 Cor 10:14–22 NASB)

The command of verse 14 could actually be translated “keep on fleeing from idolatry.” The idea is that it is a repeated temptation, one that we face over and over again.

Corinth was a city filled with temples dedicated to idol worship. On a hill overlooking and dominating the city was the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, with its 1000 priestesses who were prostitutes. Most of the people in the city who were not Christians were idolaters. They worshipped in these temples, and their worship involved immorality of every kind. Furthermore, there were restaurants connected to the temples. If we were to make an analogy to today, we might imagine a restaurant with a nightclub, a church and a house of prostitution all under one roof. This was where all the central figures of Corinth could be found, the movers and the shakers, the politicians, the athletes, the prominent in the world’s eyes. Those who didn’t attend these places were cut off from all the important social events of the city. But, Paul charged, if Christians attended and participated in these activities, they were involving themselves in idol worship.

We are inclined to think because we live in modern times this passage doesn’t apply to us. We don’t worship idols, we say; the only place we find idols today is in museums. But that isn’t true. There are idols all around us. Anything we worship is an idol. Anything to

which we attribute ultimate worth, or anything we do that gives us ultimate worth, is an idol. In fact our word “worship” is based on the Anglo-Saxon word “worth-ship,” meaning, to attribute worth to something. So anything that in our eyes is of ultimate importance or significance, anything that preoccupies us, anything we invest the bulk of our time and energy in can be an idol. An idol can be a piece of property or an investment that we are counting on downstream. Our business, our vocation, or our education can be an idol. A boyfriend or girlfriend, a mate, a house, a car, a rock group, anything can be an idol. An idol is anything that is of ultimate significance to us, anything we derive our sense of wholeness, joy, or satisfaction in life from. Idolatry is not something we merely do outwardly with our body. Idolatry occurs whenever anyone or anything becomes more important to us than the living God.

Today’s Super Bowl is an excellent example of an idol. There was a time in my life when the Super Bowl, and the festivities surrounding it, brought great satisfaction and fulfillment to me. In fact a San Francisco 49er loss, like the one last week, would have devastated me. It would taken me days to recover from such a thing because I was seeking to get much more from that game than it was designed to give. I still feel pangs of regret and emptiness when my team loses a game they shouldn’t have. When something begins to possess us to that degree, we are on the verge of idolatry. Of course, these things are not wrong in themselves. When your possessions begin to possess you (that’s the issue!) when they take the place of God in your life, then you are worshipping an idol.

Paul gives three reasons why the Corinthians may not attend these idol feasts. We will focus on these principles, and why idolatry is so dangerous.

A. Idolatry chokes off our source of life

The apostle bases his argument on the institution of the Lord’s Supper. The central ceremony of Christian, Jewish, and pagan worship is more than mere words and actions. Those who take part in these ceremonies become actual partners. That word “sharing,” used three times in these verses, is the word *koinonia*, or fellowship. The worshippers share together in the spiritual reality behind all that happens.

Paul is contrasting the table of the Lord (in which Christians partake of the bread and the cup) and an idol’s table. In other words, there are two hosts—the Lord sits at one table, and an idol sits at another. The apostle is referring to the possibility of these Christians going to the temple and participating in these idol feasts. That, he says, is the table of an idol, in contrast to the table of the Lord.

The apostle’s point in using this analogy is this: what you eat is what you are. These tables actually symbolize a greater reality: what you take in is what you become. If you are sitting at an idol’s table and partaking of all the elements of that feast, then that is what you become—an idolater. But if you are sitting at the Lord’s table you are partaking of a greater reality: the eating and drinking of Christ. We must remember that that central act of our worship is not a religious ritual, but rather a picture of a relationship with the Lord of the universe. It is a symbol of the essence of Christianity: the risen Lord Jesus indwells us, and we eat and drink of his life. He is our resource for living. He is everything we need. He is our source of wisdom and strength. We don’t produce these things in ourselves. People sometimes say, “You are what you eat.” Paul says that if you eat and drink at the Lord’s table, then that is the character you will

increasingly display. But if you eat and drink at an idol's table, than that is the character you will display.

The symbolic imagery of eating and drinking is more widely used than we think. We speak of "devouring" a book, "drinking in" someone's talk, "swallowing" a story, or "chewing" over a matter. We say we can't "stomach" an idea, or even a person. Oftentimes while my mother was holding her grandson, I heard her say she could "eat" him!

There are only two tables, says Paul. You must choose the one you will sit at. You can't have it both ways. He doesn't say we should not partake of both. He says we can't! The two are incompatible. It is the same argument that Jesus made when he told his disciples, "You cannot serve God and mammon, because you will end up hating one and loving the other." You can't make an idol out of your job or your mate or your children or your hobbies or your car and have the life of Christ, because in worshipping that idol you cut yourself from the resources of Christ. We would like to have it both ways. We would like to have God's power for our program, but Paul tells us we can't. It is either one or the other.

B. Idolatry is controlled by demonic activity

Verse 20 reveals a significant truth that we would not know apart from revelation. Paul tells us that behind what we think is a seemingly innocent activity is a demon. Look at verse 19-20: "What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?" The apostle knows there is no reality to the idol. He knows the problem is not some piece of wood. In the OT, idols were made fun of. But that isn't the problem. He continues: "The things which the gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons." Paul learned this from Deuteronomy 32, where Moses told the people that idol worship was basically demon worship, because behind the idol was not a god, but a demon. We learn from this truth that demonic activity is behind these seemingly harmless things.

We ought never forget that the whole universe is armed for our destruction. In John 8, Jesus declared that the devil is a liar and a murderer. His goal is destruction, and his chief weapon is deception. He wants to destroy the quality of our lives, to reduce them to boredom and depression, to make us frustrated and irritable so that every little thing bothers us and we are hard to live with. This is what idols lead to. I know, because I've been there. This happens in our jobs, especially at times where much time and energy is needed on a certain project. The evil one deceives us into thinking that if we work harder on a certain project it will produce dividends, and we will feel satisfied and worthwhile. But this is a lie.

Behind all idolatry is an enemy. There are demons out to destroy you, and to ruin the quality of your life.

C. Idolatry arouses the jealousy of God

Finally, in v. 22, Paul says, "Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?" In addition to becoming involved in demonic activity, when we are involved with idol worship we invoke God's wrath. God becomes jealous. Now jealousy is not always a bad thing. There is such a thing as legitimate jealousy. Throughout the OT when Israel was unfaithful, God got jealous, because Israel legitimately belonged to him. Such contact with demonic forces unleashes devastating forces of disintegration. We as Christians are not to play around with such destructive things. Our Lord is a jealous God. He puts up with no rivals, no comparisons, no

alternatives. When we are unfaithful to him, he will bring us back to him. He will not stand idly by and let us drift away into some idolatrous preoccupation with the world. He will strike at idol worship and destroy it. If your affections are deeply entwined with an idol, you are going to get hurt in the process. And in your hurt you might find yourself crying out to God and asking him why he is hurting you. But it is an act of love from a jealous God who will not allow you to drift into that kind of preoccupation.

Anything can be an idol. Keep on fleeing from idolatry.

Paul now changes his focus from the danger of compromise to the danger of legalism.

II. The danger of legalism—Use your freedom to serve

Verses 23-11:1

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience' sake; for the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains. If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone should say to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. (10:23-11:1)

What a dramatic change of lifestyle must have come from "playing the Corinthian" to "being a Christian"! It must have caused great tension in terms of socializing and hospitality. And it would be easy for someone with a weak conscience to withdraw into the Christian community, to stay inside his holy huddle. Sometimes we feel we can protect ourselves by becoming involved only in Christian activities.

There was a crucial need then, as there is now in the church, for Christians to be properly taught on the things that really matter. If the church at Corinth was going to penetrate that licentious city, they needed to be less, not more concerned, about "doubtful things." It was God's desire that the life of faith extend into every dark alley and moral cesspool in Corinth. It still is today. Thus we must be equally careful concerning the danger of legalism.

This paragraph draws together the threads of the last three chapters, and it stresses two important principles. We have already talked about the first one.

A. Christianity is a life of freedom

Christians are free! Very few things are prohibited to us. And the few things that are forbidden are those which would destroy us. There were thousands of trees in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve to enjoy; only one was prohibited to them. That is how it is with us. Unless I am forbidden by Scripture I am free to participate in whatever activity I please. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified (put to its intended use) by means

of the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:5). Titus reminds us that “To the pure, all things are pure” (Tit 1:15). God has given us all things richly to enjoy. Earlier in this series I spoke of the difference between legalism and genuine Christianity. The legalist looks at life and says that everything is wrong unless he knows that it is right. However, the Bible says everything is right unless I know it is wrong. If I say everything is wrong unless I know it is right, then I am always afraid of everything, always suspect of everything, wondering if I am going to do something wrong that I didn’t know was wrong and God will be angry with me.

Don’t try to run away from life. We are to live right in the midst of the world, not apart from it. We will never escape worldliness by trying to avoid every temptation. Temptations will pursue you wherever you go. Enjoy life! Don’t examine everything under a microscope to see whether it is going to be dangerous to you. Relax! God knows where you are. He placed you there and provided you with a world to enjoy. Concerning food touched by idolatrous practices, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, “When you go to the meat market (which often buys its food from the temple) stop asking all kinds of leading questions about its origins. When an unbeliever invites you over to dinner, enjoy it, without having a quiet session in the corner with your conscience.”

It is clear from this passage that separation to Christ does not mean separation from non-Christians. Our fellowship is to be with Christ, and our friendship freely given to non-Christians around us. Christians who refuse are only deceiving themselves. Paul says in v. 26 that if an unbeliever invites you to his home, then go. If you are an uptight, legalistic, self-righteous Christian, however, you don’t need to worry — you will never get an invitation to a non-Christian home. You will only get invited if you are an openhearted, friendly person who understands that people are struggling and in need, and you see past the outward veneer to the lonely hearts underneath.

Truth must always be held in balance, however, thus Paul qualifies this truth with another principle.

B. Genuine freedom is a life of service

There are certain things that may restrict our freedom, and one is our love for our brothers and sisters. Our freedom is intended to be used to serve them.

The question facing the Christian here is, “Shall I indulge in what I feel free to do?” The action, says Paul, is irrelevant. It has nothing to do with food. It is not really important whether you eat the meat or not, whether you drink the wine or not (we could go on with the list). I am no better if I do or if I don’t. The significant issue is my brother’s or sister’s spiritual life. If I am going to have to choose between my momentary act of freedom and my brother’s growth, there is no question as to what I must do.

The issue here is not the offending of another, but the possibility of injuring someone spiritually. It is matter of someone’s conscience being weak, not of someone’s prejudices being irritated. There are many instances where people are offended by certain actions that have nothing to do with losing their faith or hindering their growth. That is not what Paul is talking about here. If that were the case, we could scarcely do anything without offending someone. Jesus offended a lot of people. He offended the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the politicians. He offended both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Paul is speaking about acting in such a way that others will be damaged spiritually by emulating our behavior. If my actions cause this, then I will give up my freedom. My brother or sister is much more important than my freedom.

For the Corinthians, and I fear for some of us as well, knowledge implied rights to act in “freedom.” In this scenario, freedom becomes the highest good because it truly helps and exalts the individual. Biblically, however, the opposite is true. It is love that prevails. This implies the free giving up of one’s “rights” for the sake of others, because “life together” in community is the aim of salvation.

Paul ends this whole section with four verses of entirely positive guidelines for life in the Christian community, which is neither Jewish, nor Greek, but a third race, the church of God. This is true Christian freedom:

- 1) v. 31: Whatever you do, Do all to the glory of God—not to establish your own freedom.
- 2) vv. 32-33: Give no offense...try to please all men in all things—rather than demanding your rights.
- 3) v. 33: Seeking the profit of many—rather than your own benefit or fulfillment.
- 4) v. 33: Seek that many may be saved—rather than being preoccupied with your own salvation.
- 5) 11:1: Be imitators of Christ—not boosting in your own reputation.

This is true Christian freedom—being free from ourselves in order to glorify God. Both sections of this passage could be summed up in the words of Jesus when he told us, “Love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” These words sum up what Paul is saying in this passage. Flee idolatry, flee self-righteousness, love God above all else, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the essence of Christianity, and this is Paul’s word to us today.

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